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A RETROSPECTIVE VIEW OF AN IMPORTANT GERMAN GRAMMAR

Within the past decade a new type of German grammar has established itself in the favor of schools and colleges. The voluminous and discursive treatise has been largely superseded by the "Outlines," "Foundations," "Essentials," "Elements,"—or by whatever other names the summary and selective presentations of the most needful facts about accidence and syntax happen to be variously designated. I am a confirmed believer in these little books, especially when they are equipped with a good apparatus for practice. Not that I regard homoeopathic dosing as a particularly commendable feature of collegiate education. But I perceive in many of these minor sized grammars a lucidity and correctness of statement and altogether a pedagogical skill considerably superior to what may be commonly detected in the older and more ponderous repositories of grammatical lore. Apparently, the output of books of this kind is still on the increase, and each year brings forth additional varieties all patterned more or less after the same model. A multitude of ambitious reformers are keeping the academic world in a state of expectancy by quietly hinting that the ideal grammar must linger in abeyance till other work now on their hands shall have been disposed of. Meanwhile, the merry competition is visibly producing a salutary effect on the evolution of grammatical literature in general.

But it goes without saying that even the most masterly epitome cannot permanently supplant a comprehensive treatise in any fit subject of instruction. Since, for better or worse, high school and college cumber their curriculum with the elementary study of foreign languages, instead of relegating that branch of study to where it belongs,—namely, to the grade schools,—a short-cut to the practical goals of such work is rendered almost imperative. Also on general educational principles, a preliminary, fairly rapid orientation may be safely recommended for the earlier stage of a language course. But after this introductory sweep of the field the learner should be induced to cover the ground more carefully step by step; and to overcome by special exertions certain rather trying places in this uphill travel. In my firm opinion, none of the handy

breviaries now in vogue suffice for much longer than the first year's study. For the continuation of the course I would suggest, instead of the "more advanced" school grammars,—which as a rule are not sufficiently distinct from the grammatical primer to obviate the tedium of repetition—a work of reference so complete in contents and thorough in execution that it may be employed as a constant guide in all subsequent work and can throw light on the all too numerous and at times very perplexing questions which in a prolonged and progressive study are bound to trouble the mind not of the pupil alone but of the teacher as well.

By happy coincidence at least one work of this grander stamp made its appearance almost simultaneously with the ascendancy of the sketchy grammatical guide book. George O. Curme's "*A Grammar of the German Language*" has been much discussed and often reviewed, and is fairly and fully entitled to the great measure of praise that it has called forth. So unanimous has been the critical—and uncritical—eulogy, that the author must more than once have protested with Lessing: "Wir wollen weniger erhoben Und häufiger gelesen sein."

Nevertheless, it is impossible to enter upon any comment whatsoever of this monument of scholarly labor without paying passing tribute to the broad and profound learning, the penetrating practical insight, and the spirit of professional self-sacrifice by which it was brought into being. This grammar, to put it plainly, constitutes one of the clearest titles of modern philology in the United States to international recognition. This fact makes it clear that mere blind fealty, superstitious acceptance and slavish affirmation of its every utterance cannot be the most welcome reward for a gift whose lasting worth must of necessity be coterminous with its perfectibility. "Wenn die Könige bau'n, haben die Kärner zu tun"; the desire to co-operate with Professor Curme, be it never so modestly, imposes the duty of some form or other of frank and helpful criticism. Of all the users of his book the author himself—quo quisque est doctior, eo est modestior,—was the first to voice the Faustian plaint: "Ach, dass dem Menschen nichts Vollkomm'nes wird, empfind' ich nun." His untiring sense of obligation toward his *magnum opus*,—the embodiment of half a lifetime of unremitting care and toil—prompted Curme, even before the book was fairly off the press, to make extensive preparations for a revised edi-

tion, and to these he still devotes his time and strength. It is in this phase that every serious student and teacher of German may in slight measure assist. My own suggestions are offered in this spirit.¹

Any criticism that would be just must reckon fully with two factors: the prime purpose of the product under consideration, and its utility and worth from its own point of view. Curme's grammar aims to be nothing short of a thesaurus of usage, and it must accordingly be judged by the author's explicit profession² that it is based not upon some ideal conception of how the language should be spoken, but upon the actual and varying usage of the intelligent classes. The test of the practical usefulness of such great liberality of procedure can only lie in the trustworthiness of its discriminations. Curme fetches his material much more resolutely than any of his American predecessors from the living idiom, without abating, however, the philologist's privilege of focusing upon the living phenomenon the light of its past evolution. To be sure this recessive process of explanation is not carried down to the origins. For inasmuch as it is after all the New-High-German *Schriftsprache* that is to be historically elucidated, the author has refrained in general from going back beyond Luther for his illustrations; though casual evidence is adduced from earlier periods, no connected outline of their linguistic history is attempted.

Now the basic difficulty in constructing a grammar of German on the principle adopted by Curme is that the German *Schriftsprache*,—fundamentally a Middle-German, more precisely Upper-Saxon dialect,—has by the workings of its multiple development been rendered constitutionally refractory to any simple system of codification. Although the term *Schriftsprache* is commonly used to cover both the written and the spoken idiom, they are in fact widely at variance. Worse still, there is no actual uniformity governing even the *Schreibstil* alone throughout the German territory. For, to mention only one important counter-action, the tendency towards the standardization of literary expression, so well grounded in the eighteenth century, has in our own time been neutralized to no slight degree by the vigorous emphasis placed upon the "regional" or "natal" element in style and diction. And it requires no elabor-

¹ Elsewhere I propose to publish a complete list of my emendations.

² Introduction, p. vii.

ate argument to prove that perpetual uniformity would have been psychologically impossible even in the absence of specific counter-agents. The relation between ideas and their articulation,—in other words, grammar,—cannot be rigidly immutable. Inasmuch as the conceptual content of human thinking is variable both as to quantity and quality, there results a corresponding liability to change in the forms of expression. And since this variability is peculiarly great in modern German, owing, among other patent reasons, to temperamentally differing response of the component elements of the nation to its very rapid transformation, the problem of capturing the protean forms of the living speech without trapping them in more or less artificial rules and formulas is rendered complex and difficult in the extreme. At every step the analyst is baffled by discrepancies and fluctuations which have their source and being in the “separatistic” tendencies that inhere in German character. Consequently, a critique of collateral forms and constructions is subject to grave errors which even the most scrupulous ἀκριβεια cannot obviate. Especially does it require a linguistic tact of the nicest balance to discriminate with surety between the dialectal, archaic, archaistic, facetious, slangy, colloquial, bookish, and other possible values and bearings of many vocables and locutions. Here we find Curme like most grammarians,—not excepting those to the manner born—not infrequently erring in the direction of undue generalization. For instance, he unqualifiedly declares that “colloquial language often preserves earlier forms that have elsewhere passed away.” Of course the statement is not without a large measure of truth; but thus baldly put it invites the false inference that colloquial speech is *eo ipso* more conservative than formal speech. The assertion *per contra* that fickleness, too, is a characteristic of colloquial language,—think of the prodigious fertility of German in respect of slang,—would be less open to challenge.

Now it is certainly within the limits of the scientifically conceivable and desirable that a grammar might be wholly sub-based by spoken language, as an offset to the opposite extreme, namely the record and systemization of approved literary usage, which has until lately almost monopolized the earnest attention of grammarians. But Professor Curme’s ambitious endeavor was to register the facts and phenomena of the German “*Gegenwartssprache*” both as it is

written and as it is spoken, and thereby build up a corpus of N. H. G. usage in its fullest extent. The scope of his work is broadly indicated as follows:³ "Although this book is designed as a study of the German of today, it was found necessary, in order to give a faithful picture of *the living language in all its varied styles*, to include to a certain extent a study of the earlier forms of the language" But "although attention has thus been *carefully directed to early N. H. G. and also to the language of the classical period* and the conspicuous authors of the first half of the nineteenth century, the main stress lies in the direction of present usage." For this principal purpose the author scanned or scrutinized no less than seven hundred works of varied styles published since 1850 and, in addition to them, many representative newspapers from different parts of the German Empire, Austria, and Switzerland.

It was undoubtedly wise to turn to as large an areopagus as feasible in order to ascertain the main drift of opinion and practice on nearly every grammatical question that is still in any way open to dispute. But it is not made clear by what criterion this formidable bulk of raw material was sifted. If it is true on the one hand that even the enormous range of the work must fail to bring all existing phenomena under observation, it is equally clear on the other hand that from the mixed and confused current of opinion among such a multitude of judges the student would want to appeal to a smaller court of higher resort. Yet the all-important question concerning the true source of linguistic authority is hardly broached. We are told, to be sure, that "the usage of *the best authors of our time* was accepted in all cases as the highest authority." But that comes near begging the essential question. Are all those seven hundred to be ranked as "best writers"? If so, how came they to be selected, and by whom? And if not so, then who are the "best writers" among the number? Presumably those who use the best German. And what is the best modern German? Curme expressly tells us: that used by the best authors of our time.⁴ So there we are in the full swing of the logical merry-go-

³ Introduction, p. viii.

⁴ But is it known to Professor Curme that some of our foremost writers submit their manuscript to professional germanists for final revision—and correction? In such cases, in whom is he vesting the *supremum arbitrium*?

round. If the point were really to be decided, by plebiscite or any other method, it is extremely improbable that unanimity could be reached as to who are the very best German authors; and even if it were possible, the objection would still hold good that superior writers, owing to their more pronouncedly individual, often markedly heterodox style, may not always be the safest guides to the lessons of "actual usage." So, for instance, it would be the height of pedantry not to reckon Gottfried Keller among the best German writers of his century. Yet to recommend as *mustergültig* for general emulation his diction, teeming with Helvetianisms and repristinations and, if the truth may be told, irritating personal oddities, would be to encourage affectation and eccentricity in the great mass of us who need constantly to be reminded that "quod licet Jovi," etc. . . .

Undeniably, the German idiom of today differs in many respects from the idiom of fifty, sixty years ago. If, therefore, a grammar of up-to-date German turns to well-known writers for its standards and authority, the selection would better be made solely on linguistic and not on any other literary grounds. In such case a writer like Wilhelm Raabe, notwithstanding his artistic eminence, would hardly figure as an exponent of crisp, breezy, normal twentieth-century German. The very tempo of our style has passed through a change and Raabe's leisurely *andante* rather drags in our ears, accustomed by this time to a brisk and flexible *allegro*. Yet in Curme's grammar examples from Raabe are adduced with greater frequency than from any other writer.

Somehow it seems as though Professor Curme had been restrained by the philologist's deep-seated and ineradicable sense of piety towards the inherited past from really striking out into unbeaten paths as boldly as he meant to do. At all events, he is in his attitude towards many problems a conservative by instinct and training, and on that score he might be expected to show greater leniency to other workers in the field. But it is human nature to forget that even those of us who do not live in glass houses, inhabit houses that are not without windows. And apart from the consideration of tolerance, the wholesale berating of German grammarians as a class is not fully warranted by the facts. Is not Curme taking fright at a bugaboo when he warns against the "native grammarian in his quite uniform recommendation of the older more

dignified inflection," as though this man of straw were the arch-betrayer of our guileless young students? If I may judge by my own experience, much more mischief is wrought by grammarians and teachers of other than German nationality, so apt to err,—and then usually on the side of ultra-conservatism,—from the lack of a finely discriminating *Sprachgefühl* or through an intransigent partiality for the classics. The actual status of historical and descriptive grammar in modern Germany makes it almost preposterous for a foreign scholar to sound an alarm against "the few narrow-minded theorists who would degrade a rich and plastic language, capable of great and varied development, to their own petty, paltry organ." In direct refutation of this plain charge of dogmatism, the openmindedness of German grammarians is imperishably recorded in the roll of honor, reaching across the stretch of a century from Jacob Grimm to our own contemporaries and coevals,—men like Paul, Wilmanns, Behaghel, etc., to whom Professor Curme makes candid acknowledgment of his indebtedness.⁵ To these men, and to scores of others similarly eminent,—Heyne, Sanders, Andresen, Wunderlich, Sütterlin, Engeliën, Blatz, Weisse, *e tutti quanti*, the problems of German grammar present themselves in a light not essentially different from that in which they are viewed by our distinguished American colleague. For my part I could not name one German grammarian of standing and repute who might be justly denounced as an intransigent upholder of worn-out conventions. In his own advanced position and attitude what could be more heartening to our author than Behaghel's resolute promulgation of the *usus quem penes arbitrium est* and such ringing manifestos of sound radicalism as Schroeder's *Vom papiernen Stil* or Matthias' *Sprachleben und Sprachschäden*? Not a few of the Germans have gone considerably farther than has Curme in their opposition to the canonical conception of grammar, from John Ries's temperate protest up to Max Kleinschmidt's vehement onslaught.⁶ Indeed it is questionable whether any other inexact science has been treated at the hands of German scholars more resolutely as a "*voraussetzungslose Wissenschaft*" than has the theory of modern grammar.

⁵ Introduction, p. xii.

⁶ *Grammatik und Wissenschaft*. Hannover, Jänecke, 1908.

Who would not gladly endorse the pious wish that "in its present interesting period of growth may the German language remain unchecked and free." But let no sensible person give comfort and countenance to the eccentric genius of Wilhelm Ostwald in its propaganda for the banishment of grammar. Admitting that the services of the grammarian were overrated of yore, what lover of the humanities would be willing to discard his influence? Our faith in the inherent possibilities of the language is as deep and strong as Curme's. The *fable convenue* about the awkwardness and obscurity of German diction is losing its credence abroad, and no longer may the Philistine join with impunity in the lamentations of Goethe, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche about the ineptitude of their mother tongue,—subjective complaints which for the most part were indicative of the eternal discrepancy between the highest intentions of genius and the limitations set for actual performance, and yet are to this day invoked by half-informed scoffers in support of the foolish contention that stiffness is a marked and insuperable drawback of German and disqualifies the language for a vehicle of subtlest thought and mood.

For all that, we cannot adjust the plain lesson of experience to Professor Curme's cheery faith in a sort of linguistic teleology. "In the nation," says he, "lie ever concealed countless hidden forces that are unceasingly at work on the strengthening, upbuilding, and beautifying of the language." This, again, is but half the truth. Without going to opposite extremes and setting up in the place of Curme's optimistic speech-philosophy the pessimistic doctrine of Kleinpaul which seeks to explain all structural changes in language as an incessant decline along the lines of least resistance, do not let us be beguiled into linguistic fatalism by Curme's untenable postulate of a *spontaneous* growth, refinement, and enrichment of the vernacular. For must we not point with mortified conscience to the dire results of our American policy of *laissez faire* in the great cultural question of our speech? If the systematic study of grammar can do something to check the prevailing maltreatment of English in this country,—its slovenly articulation and the ruthless abuse of its forms and syntax even by the more "lettered" classes, to say nothing of the increasing growth and spread of the most abject species of slang,—then surely we cannot spare such wholesome remedy for the quite perceptible general defection

from the higher amenities and standards of culture. Being firmly of the belief that methodical teaching can do a great deal to control any down-grade tendency, I would unabashedly plead for the retention of the grammarian in his ancient office, not of dictator by any means, but of faithful custodian and director.

And here I would in all discretion offer a word of caution. The reform grammarian, in bracing himself against the powerful tide of classical traditions, sometimes leans over too far. Such is the case when authority stands up for solecisms and slipslops; for instance, when Professor Curme turns advance agent for a popular mispronunciation, in the following passage of his grammar: "*pf* represents a compound of the simple sounds *p* and *f*, the *p* passing over into *f* before the closure is completed. *The phonetists and grammarians still hold to this compound*, but the people in a large part of the North and Midland pronounce only *f*, especially in the initial position."⁷ (Pferd-Fehrt.) This truly astonishing defense of what outside its dialectal province is simply a slothful and offensive mispronunciation gives sanction to *Affel* (for *Apfel*) and *Naff* (for *Napf*).⁸ This example, along with other instances of acoustic deception, e. g. wrong accentuations, shows that even a well-balanced judgment is liable to default when our more or less erratic senses are individually put on the witness stand.

It is not within the scope and purpose of these remarks to make up a budget of Professor Curme's *errata*. But I may at least venture to give my view as to his principal sources of error.

I refer, in the first place, to a certain arbitrariness in appraising the weight of competing or contributory reasons in rendering account for a phenomenon. Thus, we read: "As it is sometimes difficult to accent a long and heavy compound upon the first syllable as required so often by the logical force of that syllable, the principal accent is sometimes placed upon the first syllable of the second component element: *Hofmund'schenk*, *Pfingstsonn'tag*."⁹ It will be noted that no other possible reasons for the shift of accent are mentioned, although some of them might seem more plausible than

⁷ P. 53. The italics are mine. O. H.

⁸ In a subsequent article in the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* Curme reiterates the same statement on the evidence of further observations made by him in Germany.

⁹ P. 43.

the one given. In the second place, the statement inclines to discursiveness, not infrequently to diffuseness, and the exemplification is not always relevant or apposite. The following passage will illustrate my meaning: "The indefinite article is often placed directly before a noun indicating a food or drink, where in English such nouns are commonly preceded by some other noun or an indefinite pronominal adjective indicating the usual amount of the substance served at one time to one person, or the usual amount prepared at one time in one mass: *eine Suppe*, a dish of soup, *ein Butterbrot*, a piece of bread and butter, *eine Kartoffel* (?), some potatoes, a dish of potatoes, *ein Bier*, a glass of beer, *ein Bitterer*, a glass of bitters (?), *ein Brot*, a loaf of bread (?). *Meine Frau bringt mir einen Kaffee mit einem* (?) *Rum*, my wife is bringing me a cup (?) of coffee with rum.¹⁰ *Mylord bereitete sich einen Tee*, my lord made some tea for himself," etc.¹¹ Would it not have sufficed to make his lordship or some plainer person order once for all *a beer*, or *one beer*, or in case of necessity several beers, for that matter?

In parting from the subject, for the present, I desire to draw attention on my own account to a few major characteristics of our *Gegenwartsdeutsch*. Its gratifying aversion to the stereotyped phrase is the natural concomitant of a growing taste for *persönlicher Stil*. That, unfortunately, eccentricity and affectation find a fruitful soil in the widened field of self-expression, as well as do sincerity and simplicity, is perhaps only a transitory drawback. The narrower convergence of *Sprechstil* and *Schreibstil*, which throughout our best literary periods were farther apart than was the case in most other languages, is a fact of supreme significance. Since the tendency towards grammatical normalization, a natural result of fastidious schooling, has been happily accompanied by an increased wealth, flexibility, and vividness of expression, literature in its unremitting search for a more abundant and pliable organ has been getting into an ever closer touch with the actual speech. Already this gradual movement has had a marked effect on the syntax. The spell of the notorious *Bücherdeutsch* is broken. The erudite phraseology, the interminable period, the interlocked construction are dying hard, but they are dying. Our language beats with the

¹⁰ De gustibus vere non est disputandum!

¹¹ P. 61.

quickened rhythm of modern life. It is modern life that pulses in the pungent vocable and pregnant phrase, in the nervous, trenchant clause, in the terse, laconic sentence. A complete appreciation of the *rapprochement* between the conversational and the literary styles is needed to bound and define more accurately than as yet any foreign grammarian has succeeded in doing the material that should form the substratum of an ideal grammar of the German language for reference in our higher schools,—and this material in its entirety may be designated as the *Gebildetensprache der Gegenwart in Wort und Schrift*.

OTTO HELLER.

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REVIEWS

The Attitude of Gustav Freytag and Julian Schmidt toward English Literature (1848-1862). By LAWRENCE MARSDEN PRICE, PH. D. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1915. VIII + 119 pp. [Hesperia: Schriften zur germanischen Philologie, 7].

In the cultural relationship of the European nations, strange as the fact may seem today, England was Germany's last love;¹ the first was France, but after the great Revolution of 1789, the awakening among the German people began. While the July revolution of 1830 and the mad year 1848 brought the Germans again under French influence, about 1850 all eyes turned toward England. Thither the persecuted democrats had fled and from there the new gospel of democracy was preached. English institutions appealed to educated Germans as political and social ideals. Goodwill toward England passed as the mark of a higher degree of civilization and culture. In choosing, therefore, the relation of Julian Schmidt and Gustav Freytag to English literature for the subject of his well written and interesting monograph, Dr. Price has selected two of the ablest representatives of this liberal, democratic movement in

¹In this connection see the recent article by Friedrich Schönnemann, *Theodor Fontane und England*. Publications of the Modern Language Association, September, 1915.